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Taking Charge of College Admissions

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students who are applying to the 50 most prestigious colleges and universities in the country. More students are competing for the same number of freshmen spots at these institutions, so many otherwise qualified applicants simply cannot get in. Unfortunately, heightened media attention on these colleges makes it appear more difficult to gain entry to colleges and universities everywhere. The overall impact on students and parents can be nerve-racking. The pressure mounts to take more challenging coursework, register for increasingly earlier test prep, and hire expensive consultants to help students "get into" to the "right" college. College admissions has become big business, and students are the consumers. Education begins to be treated as a commodity rather than a public good. The competition creates a game of winners and losers, and the quality of education may become compromised.

Many parents can recall the days when students applied to one, or perhaps two or three colleges, got accepted to their first choice school, and were done. Today, when eleven million readers across the nation eagerly await the annual August issue of US News and World Report on college rankings, those days seem far behind us and college admissions seems unduly stressful. There are many reasons why this is so. First, thanks to the Baby Boomer generation, there are more high school graduates, and more of these students plan to attend college. In 1997 there were 2.3 million high school graduates compared to 3.3 million in 2009. Projections indicate these numbers will remain high until at least 2022. In addition, the demand for higher education has risen steadily, translating into greater numbers of applicants. For many, a college degree is viewed as the path to economic security, and studies confirm a strong correlation between earnings and educational attainment.

On their part, colleges have responded to increased demand by aggressively reaching out to prospective applicants. Colleges are escalating marketing efforts to attract large and diverse pools of qualified applicants. Broad student recruitment and direct outreach continue to grow in popularity both nationally and abroad. Schools send students multiple letters, attractive guidebooks and invitations to attend regional college conferences and visit campuses for specially arranged tours. College admissions officers visit local high schools and host booths at college fairs. And, of course, technology makes it easier than ever to access college Web sites, take virtual tours and prepare college applications. The Common Application, a standardized form that can be completed once and submitted electronically, has simplified the process; it is currently used by over 350 colleges nationwide.

These trends result in more students applying to more schools than ever before. Yet this is only part of the reasons for the increased stress. Digging a bit deeper, we see that the sources of anxiety afflicting many families are fairly limited in scope. Admission stress is most felt by

There are a few simple guidelines that can help students reclaim the college admissions process. First, control what you can control. With all the hype, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it is you, the student, who should be highly selective in the college she chooses. It is the student who must research and select colleges that meet her interests, needs and academic goals. Next, plan ahead and start early. Involve yourself in activities that are exciting to you. Colleges admit students who take grades seriously, challenge themselves and demonstrate consistent involvement in a couple of activities they are passionate about. Taking charge also means taking an honest look at areas for improvement and focusing on these during the high school years. Being a senior is far more fun and rewarding if you prepare the groundwork by doing what needs to be done in the first three years. No matter when you get started, the secret is good organization and planning, and applying to colleges that are a good match for you. It is helpful to remember that a good, often a great education can be had at more than 2500 colleges nationwide, and most of these institutions accept 50 to 80 percent of their applicants.

My column will appear regularly through the 2009-2010 academic year. Seniors can look forward to reading about what needs to get done and when. Younger students can learn much about what lies ahead and focus attention on the high schools years as a time to prepare for college. Topics will include college selection criteria and fit, getting organized, teacher recommendations, standardized testing, essays and interviews, college visits, financial aid and more. In the spring, I may be persuaded to share hidden gems-colleges I visit that could be a perfect fit for next year's graduating class! For now, enjoy the last days of summer. In September we will get to work!

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